

**Staff related factors contributing to quality in Open and Distance
Learning**

Theme: Formal Education Sub-theme: Quality issues

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ABSTRACT

Quality is one of the main concerns among institutions and stakeholders today especially those involved in open and distance learning (ODL). This study sought to examine staff related factors contributing to quality in the Zimbabwe Open University. The study was qualitative. Open-ended questionnaires, interviews and autobiographical accounts were used to collect the qualitative data. A purposive sample of 18 full time and 35 part-time lecturers from the department of education in the Zimbabwe Open University participated in the research.

The study found out that staff support, well-coordinated and systematic step-by-step processes of staff induction, staff development, caring for workers, adequate funding and results based incentives were vital to quality in an ODL institution. Staff also cited competencies in, positive attitudes towards and commitment to the philosophical underpinnings of open and distance learning as factors contributing to quality in ODL.

The study recommended that a quality improvement framework, which is more adaptable to individual contexts, must be developed as institutional policy and strategy for continuous improvement of ZOU staff. Further research could be done on the organisational factors contributing to quality and an appropriate quality framework for ZOU.

Key words: Open and Distance Learning (ODL), distance education, staff, quality, and quality frameworks.

TITLE: Staff related factors contributing to quality in ODL

BACKGROUND

Distance education has played a significant role in education through out the world. It is one of the few areas of education where technology has been central to the teaching task, for over 25 years (Bates1999). In Zimbabwe, the higher education landscape has been transformed since the establishment of the Zimbabwe Open University (ZOU) in 1993 initially as the Centre for Distance Education (CDE) of the University of Zimbabwe. From then, ZOU has grown to a point where it currently offers many varied academic programmes in four Faculties of Arts and Education, Commerce and Law, Natural Sciences and Social Sciences.

Role of the Lecturer in distance education

Willis (1993:2) argues that “the success of any distance education efforts rests squarely on the shoulders” of its academic staff. Whatever media is the dominant delivery mode, there is a lecturer/tutor for each course who plans the programme, produces learning materials and manages the programme. For these and other reasons, Ibrahim and Silong (1997) found that the tutor was an indispensable learner support in distance education.

Berge and Collins (1995) views the roles of the lecturer as comprising pedagogical, social, management and technical aspects of the learner’s experience. Jackson in Moore (1976) explains that there are two phases to teaching in distance education- the pre-active phase where the distance education lecturer sets objectives and designs the relevant curriculum and instructional strategies for the learner. He further explains that this phase takes place away from the learner. The second phase is the interactive phase where the learner and lecturer meet face-to face in tutorial sessions. In this phase the lecturer provides verbal stimulation, explanations, asks questions and provides guidance for the learner.

Since the roles of the distance education lecturer are crucial to the success of the distance education programmes, there is need to ensure that the lecturers are adequately prepared for these roles through quality initiatives. Beaudoin (1990: 21) argues that teachers used to traditional education practices have to “acquire new skills to assume expanded roles not only to teach distance education learners, but also to organise instructional resources suitable in content and format for independent study”. Even in the Zimbabwe Open University, distance educators are drawn from traditional colleges and universities, which make the need for induction into distance education imperative. One way of achieving quality in ODL is providing training and regular in-service education for lecturers to ensure that they can cope with the technological developments in open and distance learning.

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

The study sought to establish lecturer perceptions of the staff related factors contributing to quality in the Zimbabwe Open University an open and distance Education University.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The question guiding the study was: what are the perceptions of lecturers on the staff related factors contributing to quality in an open and distance learning university?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The research was a qualitative case study of the Department of Education of the Zimbabwe Open University. Qualitative research has the advantage of allowing the researchers to study a phenomenon in-depth from the lived experience of people involved in it (Merriam 1998; Watt 2007). The population for this study consisted of all the 200 part time and full time

lecturers in the department of education. Convenience sampling was used to select 18 fulltime and 35 part time lecturers who participated in this study. The subjects were chosen during the November/December 2007 examination marking session.

The study was also influenced by a philosophical assumption embracing a post positivist belief (O'Leary 2004; Denzin 1997; Kelle 2001) underlining the need to view knowledge and reality as both subjective and objective and thus obtainable through multiple methodological approaches based on the concept of triangulation (Flick 2002). Data was therefore collected through self administered open-ended questionnaires, personal accounts and focused and narrative interviews (Flick 2002). The interviews were used because they unite a high degree of openness and non-directivity with high level of concreteness and detailed information.

Armstrong (1987) argues that personal accounts are useful instruments for collecting data because they assign significance and value to a person's interpretations of his/ her experiences. In this study, the personal accounts document the inner, subjective reality as constructed by the lecturer, thus placing value on their perceptions of the factors contributing to quality and how these could be addressed in an open and distance learning context. The researchers decided to adopt the multiple method approach of data collection to triangulate data in line with Rossman and Rallis's (1998) assertion.

Data analysis

In qualitative research, data analysis is carried from the beginning of the study to make sense of what the researchers saw, heard and read. In this study the bulk of data analysis was carried out after all data had been collected. Because qualitative data analysis is iterative in nature (Holliday 2007), the researchers separately read through the data from questionnaires first aggregating the data and drawing out common themes. Then the researchers read through the personal accounts and drew out themes from these and then compared them with those from questionnaires and interviews. There was constant review of and reflection on the original data to ensure that all data was used in the final themes common to data from questionnaires, interviews and personal accounts.

As the researchers read through the data collected, they began to establish patterns and generate tentative explanations of the emerging patterns and understand the prevalence of the patterns in the data. Themes began to emerge as data analysis proceeded. However, the researchers had some tentative themes acquired through the reading of literature around quality assurance in open and distance learning (Bulawati and Zuhairi 2007; Hopkin and Lee 2001). The themes presented in the findings are what the researchers agreed on.

FINDINGS

We present below the staff related factors that ZOU lecturers indicated contributed to quality in open and distance learning.

Selection, recruitment and induction

An important finding in this study was that an organisation needs to recruit adequately qualified lecturers and carry out rigorous induction on their appointment. Induction would orient the lecturers to the philosophical underpinnings of open and distance education and also to the mission and vision of an institution. Excerpts from personal accounts, questionnaires and interviews below demonstrate the lecturers' perceptions on these two issues.

'Mediocrity breeds mediocrity-setting off an organisational chain reaction of underperformance. This must be guarded against at all costs.'

'There is need to embrace the concept of open and distance learning.'

'Staff must share the ZOU vision and mission.'

'The right people for quality are those who believe in the ideology deriving distance education.'

Dickinson et al (1992:2) argue that in spite of their crucial roles, new lecturers are often "required to begin teaching distance education learning classes with little preparation". Without adequate induction lecturers fail to appreciate the needs of open and distance learning. Besides, developing personnel in line with the vision, mission and philosophical underpinnings of an institution is important in a university setting. ZOU needs to have clearly laid out policies of inducting and orienting new lecturers, especially as most new recruits are from conventional institutions. In his study of American higher education institutions, Clark (1983) found that the attitudes of the teaching staff towards quality initiatives and towards the philosophical underpinnings of distance education were not always positive. This study found similar perceptions among the participating lecturers, as shown below.

'There is need to change preconceptions about distance education.'

'There is the tendency to employ conventional methods that can undermine quality in a teaching environment.'

'Attitude overrides all other competencies.'

The attitudes of teaching staff were seen as a stumbling block to quality in the Zimbabwe Open University. It is therefore necessary to address the issue of attitudes before new lecturers start teaching in open and distance learning institutions.

Ownership of institutional vision

In addition all lecturers, new and old, need to have ownership of the institutional vision for quality. The lecturers in this study pointed out that participation and involvement in conceptualising the vision and mission for quality will increase their ownership and acceptance of the vision. The following excerpts bear testimony to this:

'The vision and mission for quality must be ours not imposed on us.'

'Allow us to chart our way forward as a team of professionals.'

These findings on ownership of the vision for quality call for the inclusion of all staff in designing quality initiatives in an institution. This would ensure that lecturers own the vision and become committed to its success. It is, therefore, necessary to involve lecturers in the crafting of institutional vision to ensure that they are committed to its success.

World-class skills for world class performance

Chakanyuka and Chiome (2008)'s findings that staff development is critical to departmental excellence in the Zimbabwe Open University were also embraced in this study. Lecturers in

this study indicated that there was a need for skills upgrading to keep abreast with world trends in open and distance learning. Supporting statements were:

'Training and development must be a continuous and never ending process.'
'I need to improve programme management skills, communication skills and quantitative techniques.'
'I need to be skilled in accessing Internet information.'
'Workshops on research and other important aspects of teaching/lecturing should be a continuous process'

From these excerpts, we note that lecturers felt that they needed continuous training in computers and computer related technology, research and programme management. All these are crucial aspects of open and distance learning. ZOU may be offering some of these services but there is need for sustained effort to ensure that all lecturers are adequately trained and staff developed to meet the dynamic conditions of open and distance education. Creech in Ncube (2007) sums it up when he says training of people extensively and at every level, plays a vital role in transforming an organisation. Ibrahim and Silong (1997:10) recommend provision of "adequate training and development opportunities for staff that is linked to the achievement of standards". Clay (1999:1) underscores the need for training of distance education lecturers and tutors when she argues that "a well-planned, proactive distance training and support program will result in distance instructors" who are "confident and hopeful of the new possibilities for teaching and learning ahead of them". Thus, it can be argued that without adequate training and development facilities, lecturers in open and distance learning cannot effectively accomplish their goals and the goals of the institution.

Caring for the workers and staff retention strategies

One of the major themes that emerged from this study was the need for ZOU to care for its workers for them to produce quality results. Here are some supporting excerpts from the accounts and interviews:

'People work hard if they feel cared for by the organisation.'
'Along with hard work comes loyalty if one is recognised for the efforts.'
'One must feel more fulfilled and be more willing to go the extra mile.'

The issue of recognition of effort comes up even in other researches undertaken in ZOU, as Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) pointed out. The large class sizes and thin academic staff levels place heavy burdens on lecturers which inhibit their effectiveness and ability to fulfil such duties as research and community service.. Dillon (1989) also found out that success of distance education was linked to the rewards available to the distance educators and argued that absence of recognition and tenure could negatively affect the effectiveness of distance educators. The lecturers in the study went further to suggest staff retention strategies, as shown in the following excerpts:

'The university must see that strategies are put in place to attract and retain the best brains for distance education.'
'Provide enough resources for an open and distance lecturer.'
'Provide a one stop lecturer support centre and reap the results of quality.'

The issue of staff retention appears important to ZOU, as to other institutions. Continuity is affected by staff exodus due to various challenges and has been cited as a factor in this research. Chakanyuka and Chiome's (2008) findings that lecturer support services, such as provision of adequate financial and material resources were crucial to the success of distance education. Melton (2002) and Isman et al (2004) also point out that an effective distance education programme must be supported by relevant materials for students and staff.

One way in which support for lecturers can be demonstrated is provision of research opportunities, such as financial support to carry out research, present papers at international conferences and publish. In universities, one key role of lecturers is to research and publish. Worldwide, universities are judged by their research output. Lecturers in this study felt that this was a key issue, as shown below.

'A university stands or falls on its research and publication'
'Promote a research culture'.

Most universities demand that for lecturers to be promoted, they need to research and publish. When lecturers do not have access to computers and Internet facilities, they are inhibited in this respect.

Monitoring and assessing performance

It emerged from this study that monitoring and assessment are key aspects of staff related factors contributing to quality. Some supporting statements were:

'Information critical to the shaping of policy and quality strategies can be collected through performance assessments.'

The key to achieving quality lies in the link between results and the actual goings on, on the ground.'

'A built-in ongoing monitoring process must be put in place to ensure quality efforts are on track every time.'

The finding on monitoring and assessment as cornerstones of quality appear to collaborate Carr and Harries(2001)'s ideas that the bottom line for all stakeholders involved in education is that collecting data on what is happening in the classroom-monitoring and assessing performance- comprises an essential part of the effort to achieve quality in education.

Collaboration with other distance education universities

The lecturers in this study were of the opinion that collaboration with other open and distance learning universities will enhance quality. They suggested that information sharing forums must be put in place in order to advance the need for mutual collaboration. Lecturers indicated that they needed a "forum for sharing knowledge with other open and distance learning institutions" and "for sharing and comparing notes with other open and distance learning universities" so that they can learn best practices from other universities.

While Mukeredzi and Ndamba (2007) found out that communication between central and regional centres with tutors and students was unsatisfactory, the lecturers in this study would; like the university to increase contact and information sharing internally and externally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study we make the following recommendations:

- There is need for a well-structured recruitment policy that ensures the appointment of suitably qualified lecturers and rigorous induction and training;
- An effective monitoring and assessment system must be put in place to enable information dissemination and knowledge sharing within the university and the region.
- Research and publication support must be available for lecturers and should include computers, library resources and Internet facilities.
- There is need for continuous improvement of the competencies of lecturers, especially in information and communication technology and the skills required to manage the multimedia delivery modes.
- A quality improvement framework, which is more adaptable to individual contexts, must be developed as institutional strategy for continuous improvement of ZOU staff.
- Further research could be done on the organisational factors contributing to quality and an appropriate quality framework for ZOU.

(2868 words)

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